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ESSAY William Safire

Gorbachev's Hostage

WASHINGTON
When the Ayatollah Khomeini seized American hostages in Iran, the waffling and timorous Carter Administration reaction caused such a wave of revulsion here as to carry Ronald Reagan to the Presidency.

When Mikhail Gorbachev's K.G.B. seized an American hostage in Moscow, Ronald Reagan's sluggish Western White House immediately put out word that this would not affect arms control negotiations or plans for a summit. Even Mr. Carter would have responded with more backbone.

The central fact is that the American correspondent Nicholas Daniloff is a hostage. He was seized for a single purpose: to create a false counterpart to a Soviet spy arrested in the U.S. in the act of handing over cash for secrets.

What do we do about it? Our top priority is to assert our national interest, refusing to reward hostage-taking. The second priority is to secure swiftly the release of the entrapped and imprisoned American newsman.

The first trap to avoid is the "accused spy" label. The Soviet United Nations official, arrested while passing money for information, is the accused spy. The American newsman, grabbed by eight K.G.B. men after a sealed envelope was thrust in his hands, is the imprisoned newsman.

Equivalency is the Russian propaganda game; we should have no part of it. Mr. Gorbachev is trying to create a value — a captured spy — out of nothing, to balance the man we caught red-handed. We cannot tacitly accept this while formally rejecting it.

The second trap is "let's not blow this out of proportion." After all, the minimizers will say, this is just the usual tit-for-tat espionage stuff; such minor irritations must not be permitted to hinder the great business of arms control negotiations.

But the real proportion of this brutal power play is enormous. The trick of creating a false value by the simple assertion of a lie, to be traded for a real value, is an old Russian negotiating practice. If we swallow it here, we will be confronted with it at the summit. We are obligated to demonstrate that bargaining chips cannot be created out of thin air; otherwise, all negotiation is meaningless.

The third trap is to Kremlinologize it all: you see, there are these good guys, led by smiling Mike, open and forthcoming, eager for an end to the arms race, who are opposed by the sinister forces of the K.G.B. We have to understand his problems with the hard-liners and reactionaries, and

What should we do about Daniloff?

recognize that he needs some face-saving way of working out this ploy by his opponents within.

Baloney. Mr. Gorbachev toadied his way to the top via Yuri Andropov of the K.G.B.; he has his own men in all the top positions there, and has purged the top echelons of the party hierarchy and the Red Army of the old Brezhnev faction. The correspondent for U.S. News & World Report is Mr. Gorbachev's personal hostage.

The final trap is to let this widen the split among advisers at home. The professional sherpas and would-be summiteers will soon be accusing the press of putting its own interest ahead of the nation's, and denouncing the "exploitation" of this little misunderstanding by unregenerate hawks who want no arms control.

At issue is the degree of our willingness to tolerate Mr. Gorbachev's contempt for the freedom of one American, which means all Americans. In assuming we would go along with the deal of trading a legitimate newsman for a real spy, the new Russian leader has miscalculated profoundly.

Nothing Mr. Reagan and his hip-deep-in-molasses crisis managers do now should be allowed to contribute to that miscalculation. No deal is possible that ties the release of our newsman to their spy; that way is appeasement of the creation of false negotiating chips, and intolerable danger to any American on Russian soil.

As long as Mr. Daniloff remains in his cell, sitting on the cot with him is arms control, summitry, obscene grain subsidies, cultural exchanges, the works. The hostage is the gun Mr. Gorbachev holds to Mr. Reagan's head, precluding all civilized dealing.

The way to resolve this crisis is clear: let Mr. Gorbachev call the unconditional release of Mr. Daniloff "a unilateral gesture of good will." He will deserve no thanks for stopping the further descent of Soviet behavior into diplomatic state terrorism, but he will get plenty.

In setting his own ominous precedent of taking an American hostage, Mr. Gorbachev — let us hope mistakenly — has declared not just a renewal but a sharp escalation of cold war. It is for him to undeclare it. □